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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000178

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SUBJECT: COMSOCCENT VISIT WITH TURKMENISTAN'S MINISTRY OF
DEFENSE AND STATE BORDER SERVICE

Classified By: Charege Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Commander, Special Operations Central Command (COMSOCCENT), Major General Charles Cleveland, met with the Minister of Defense and the Chairman of the State Border Service of Turkmenistan to discuss ongoing military relations and the possibilities of future training, including Special Forces training in Turkmenistan. Both meetings went well, and while no definitive agreements were reached, it appears that the groundwork was laid for follow up discussions which could lead to a long term Special Operations Forces (SOF) relationship with Turkmen counterparts. END SUMMARY.

MINISTRY OF DEFENSE

¶2. (C) On 20 January 2010, Special Operations U.S. Central Command (COMSOCCENT), Major General Charles Cleveland, met with Minister of Defense General Major Yaylym Berdiev, 1st Deputy Minister and Chief of Staff Colonel Begench Gundogdyev, Chief of the Ground Forces, Lieutenant Colonel Mollayev, and the Chief of the International Relations Department, Major Takayev (COMMENT: Both Gundogdyev and Mollayev are IMET graduates and along with Takyev, are former Defense Attaches, Gundogdyev to the U.S., Mollayev to Turkey, and Takayev to Pakistan). The Minister was a bit late in arriving, which allowed for some small talk, in English, between the members of the two sides. When General Cleveland solicited advice from the Turkmen on strategy in Afghanistan, Lieutenant Colonel Mollayev cautioned against making too many agreements with tribal chiefs, as their loyalties could change at any moment.

¶3. (C) The Turkmen military delegation, with the exception of the Minister, are quite fluent in English due to the time that they've spent outside of Turkmenistan as Defense Attaches. The Minister, who is most comfortable in Turkmen, read from an opening script in Russian, then turned the floor over to the Chief of Staff for most of the discussion points, and then gave closing remarks, once again in Russian.

¶4. (C) The Minister opened with the usual welcoming words and praised the U.S. Central Command relationship with the Ministry of Defense. He lauded the approximately 50 events

on the military to military contact plan that U.S. Central Command currently plans to execute in 2010. The Minister spoke of previous visits of the Central Command Commander, the delivery of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, and of a desire for cooperation. He mentioned that the issues of narcotics trafficking and terrorism were not just a threat to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, but also to the entire Central Asia region. Berdiev said that the greatest needs for Afghanistan are: First, security; second, political development; and third, economic stability. The Minister stated that the U.S. and Turkmenistan can develop cooperation on the grounds of mutual interest.

15. (C) COMSOCENT offered the possibility of developing a relationship with Turkmen forces with special operations type missions. Some examples of such cooperation might include the possible training of MoD snipers, close quarters combat/clearing buildings, and medical training. Other possibilities, such as working with the Turkmen navy, were brought up. These ideas were proposed as examples to stir thought on ways to cooperate. The Turkmen seemed receptive to the ideas and offered to follow up the meeting with more detailed discussions of possible avenues for further cooperation. The Turkmen reminded the U.S. delegation that U.S. Special Forces (SOF) had been in Turkmenistan in 1999-2000 for "Balance" series exercises. While the Ministry's comments could be a polite "we'll see," there seemed to be genuine interest and a possibility for following up these meetings and turning the proposals into more concrete events, from subject matter expert visits and information exchanges to U.S. training of Turkmen SOF, and

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eventually even joint U.S./Turkmen SOF training events, like the 1999 training. COMSOCENT stated that the initial objective is to build mutual trust and confidence between our special operations forces.

16. (C) The Chief of Staff encouraged continuation of the annual Special Operations conference, adding that Turkmenistan could use courses to increase knowledge and skills in special operations. Additionally, Gundogdiev stated that the offer should come as a written proposal for their consideration. (COMMENT: Colonel Gundogdiev was likely referring to a diplomatic note, which is the primary means of communication with any portion of the Turkmen Government. END COMMENT.) This ensures that it appears that the U.S. offers engagement, and Turkmenistan politely accepts. A written proposal is also necessary so that the other elements of government outside of the Ministry of Defense (i.e., MFA, security services) can vet and give their approval.

17. (C) COMSOCENT stated that the U.S. could initially start offering training without weapons, but that SOF training events would eventually involve shooting. Gundogdiev replied that Turkmen weapons could be used. Colonel Gundogdiev later reiterated that Turkmenistan needs good courses and equipment such as parachutes and armored body vests (body armor). It was also noted that Turkmenistan has a need for naval cadet training of one to four years, as well as naval special operations training. He stated that the Ministry of Defense places special operations forces on contract (COMMENT: This probably means that special forces are drawn from professional soldiers and not conscripts. END COMMENT.).

STATE BORDER SERVICE

18. (C) COMSOCENT also met with the State Border Service head, General Major Murad Islamov. After introductory comments on both sides, Islamov and COMSOCENT discussed ways in which U.S. SOF could work with and train Turkmen Border Guards. State border service missions of repelling border crossings and operating in the mountainous and desert terrain seemed to be a common ground for cooperation. Islamov discussed current threats on the Turkmen border. On the

Afghan border, specific threats include extremism, narcotics trafficking, terrorism, and the link between the two of financing. He noted that the narcotics helped finance the terrorists. Islamov also discussed the Iranian border and stated that there were really no problems on this border and reiterated that Turkmenistan's borders were fairly stable and secure. He noted that while there had been no incidents in the past of border penetration, this did not relieve him of the responsibility to be always ready. Islamov also maintained that Turkmenistan is not a drug trafficking route like its neighbors, although when pressed, he acknowledged that some drugs of course do slip through, but that it is nothing on a large scale as is the case in other Central Asian countries. There are no heavily used drug routes through Turkmenistan.

¶9. (C) COMSOCENT also discussed the maritime border on the Caspian Sea. As there are naval capabilities within SOCCENT, there could be room for maritime cooperation on the Caspian. Such missions as Domain Awareness (situational awareness), interdiction, direct action, and riverine operations are avenues that could be explored in follow-up meetings. These SOCCENT missions coincide with cooperation previously discussed between the State Border Service and U.S. Embassy representatives.

¶10. (C) When COMSOCENT offered for a staff officer to stay behind for a couple of days should the SBS wish to follow up, Islamov stated that he would need more time before he could discuss proposals. He seemed truly interested in seeing what the SBS's needs were and presenting them accurately to SOCCENT in the upcoming Action Officer Working Group. It is

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clear Islamov didn't have permission to agree to such training on his own, but the desire to get training SBS needs fits with his style. He prefers not to take whatever is offered, if it does not support SBS missions.

TURKMENISTAN PULLS OFF A LAST MINUTE CHANGE

¶11. (C) The delegation from SOCCENT had their arrival in Ashgabat delayed by weather for nearly 20 hours. In nearly a complete change from past practice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative meeting the delegation at the airport informed Embassy officers that the Ministry of Defense, including the Minister himself, was prepared to stay late on 19 January to meet the delegation. Another change was after the Embassy asked if it would be possible to postpone until meetings the following morning. MFA then rescheduled meetings with the Ministry of Defense and the State Border Service, to include the Minister of Defense and Chairman of the State Border Service. An additional positive change was that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs scheduled the VIP lounge for the delegation's arrival and departure, unbeknownst to the Embassy.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: The Turkmen's willingness to be flexible and accommodate the meetings, and the positive response to the subjects of the discussion were encouraging. While no commitments were made, follow up discussions will be held soon during the CENTCOM Action Officer Working Group February 12-13. Differing from previous meetings in which U.S. proposals were noted, there was much more give and take and actual discussion. Only time will tell, but there does seem to be a difference in attitudes in the Ministry of Defense, and in the levels of military cooperation this neutral country is willing to accept.

¶13. (U) COMSOCENT cleared this cable.
CURRAN